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# BAM blog

TUESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2017

## The *Man of Good Hope*

In *A Man of Good Hope*, *coming to the BAM Howard Gilman Opera House February 15–19*, the *Isango Ensemble* takes up Jonny Steinberg's riveting book about a young Somali refugee who fled his country's civil war, only to find himself in a new violent reality in South Africa. A note from Steinberg follows.

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Photo: Keith Pattison

Our collaboration was, if not a tawdry affair, certainly an awkward one. When I met him Asad was hustling for a living. He'd leave his shack on the outskirts of Cape Town in the early mornings, hang out in the Somali section of Mitchell's Plain township and ask the traders and businessmen he met there if they needed a delivery to be made. A man living that sort of life hardly had the time a writer demanded. And so I bought his time. I capitalized the business he wanted to start: selling cigarettes, mobile phone airtime, and frozen chickens from his shack. It cost me less than £400. In exchange, I acquired a subject sufficiently sedentary to interview for weeks and months at a time.

I will not say that the book wrote itself. Nor would I be so presumptuous as to think that Asad had a hand in writing it. Nonetheless, something of his grace and his skill were transferred to me, making the writing of the book possible.

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Zoleka Mpotsha, Ayanda Tikolo, Siphosethu Juta & Luvo Tamba. Photo: Keith Pattison

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But under what strange conditions this transference took place. I was a white man in a good car and Asad was convinced that my presence in his shantytown home would attract men with guns. He refused to meet in his shack where he would have no forewarning of an attack. Instead he insisted that we talk in my car; there he had a 360-degree view and could see trouble coming. And so that is where we sat day in and day out for nearly a year.

When the first draft of the manuscript was written I asked him to read it. He refused. The story of his past was simply too sad, he said. I redoubled my efforts to get him to look at it, but he only dug in his heels. He simply would not. I was disconcerted. By the time I was done writing I had retraced most of his steps through the Horn of Africa, had found long-lost relatives of his in various parts of the world, and had discovered something of the lost genealogy of his family. Between my forensic interest in his history and his refusal to read about it was a chasm that made me immensely uneasy.

It took a long while for me to settle upon an explanation. Taking in his past as a narrative unspooling through time was simply unhelpful to him, I believe. More than that, it was destructive. To have this perennially rejected boy, forever kicked around like a stone, installed in his imagination, was to rob himself of the wherewithal to live in the present. Better to see his past in flashes, to keep in his mind particular moments: moments of mystical feeling, of love, of the desire for revenge, moments when he was the one who decided what would happen next.

Deep in our culture is the belief that unearthing memory is therapeutic. I think that Asad has taught me otherwise. He gave me the material to assemble a story about his personal history. But the story is not for him; it is for the edification of others.

*Isango Ensemble / Young Vic's production of [A Man of Good Hope](#), by Jonny Steinberg, directed by Mark Dornford-May, is at the BAM Howard Gilman Opera House from February 15–19.*

Posted by Susan at 11:22 AM

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